

Great Performances Wasted in Sterile 'Revolutionary Road'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 2, 2009 - 10:50am

- [Brian Tallerico](#) [2]
- [Justin Haythe](#) [3]
- [Kate Winslet](#) [4]
- [Kathy Bates](#) [5]
- [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) [6]
- [Mad Men](#) [7]
- [Michael Shannon](#) [8]
- [Movie Review](#) [9]
- [Revolutionary Road](#) [10]
- [Sam Mendes](#) [11]
- [Suburbia](#) [12]
- [Zoe Kazan](#) [13]



Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Frank (Leonardo DiCaprio) and April Wheeler (Kate Winslet) refuse to believe that they're like everyone else in the 1950's suburbia of Sam Mendes' frustrating "Revolutionary Road". They may go to the same jobs and travel in the same social circles, but, unlike the bored housewives and husbands around them, they haven't given up on their dreams.

They're ego-driven, selfish characters who long to escape the ennui of the white picket fence but are constantly brought back to it by the trappings of family and work.

Frank and April live the unfulfilled lives of millions from the '50s to the '00s, but to what cinematic end? No one involved with "Revolutionary Road" asked the crucial question - why should we care? There's a misanthropy, a bitterness that pervades the entirety of "Revolutionary Road" that makes it impossible to emotionally invest in the broken dreams of the Wheelers and, consequently, keeps Sam Mendes' film from becoming the effective drama that it could have been in a less clinical director's hands.



Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet star in "Revolutionary Road".

Photo credit: Francois Duhamel, DreamWorks

From the beginning of "Revolutionary Road," Frank and April are fighting. The Wheelers have a beautiful family, nice friends, and a gorgeous

home, but they feel trapped in their suburban existence and they lash out at each other constantly.

April longs for her dreams of being an actress and Frank loathes his boring job. Frank cheats on his wife with the new girl at the office and April not-so-secretly hates her husband. To everyone they encounter, Frank and April seem like the perfect couple, but they're seething with self-hatred and resentment.



The Wheelers devise one last way to recapture the revolutionary spirits of their youth - they'll leave suburbia behind and head to Paris. With tragic results, the hooks of daily life in the real world - mostly career and family - make that transition difficult. When neighbor Helen Givings (Kathy Bates) and her troubled son (Michael Shannon) come over to visit, the supposedly mentally ill man sees right through the martini lunch facade of the Wheelers and pushes the right buttons that will lead to inevitable tragedy.

"Revolutionary Road" is yet another film about the outward perfection of suburban married life masking in inner turmoil and pain. The problem is that for those films to be effective, the audience needs a reason to care and Mendes and screenwriter Justin Haythe completely discard the element of likable characters. Frank and April are not good people. They're selfish, bickering souls who most of us wouldn't want to spend a few minutes with much less a film's running time. They're fighting before the credits even roll, giving the audience no reason to care about them fixing their marital problems or catching their dreams.

What saves "Revolutionary Road" from being purely a mediocre domestic drama is the work by DiCaprio and Shannon. The latter is so riveting that when he leaves the movie after his brief time in it, you'll wish you could go with him, even if his character does feel a little contrived.

As for Leo, he still looks a little young for a part like this but that almost makes the performance more effective, considering Frank is essentially a child stuck in a man's body. Going from bitterly angry to tragically wounded in the same sentence, DiCaprio is great. And Winslet is always fantastic, even if the part she's given is underwritten.

In the end, "Revolutionary Road" feels designed to make a statement or telegraph something important about the bleakness of dreams lost in the streets of suburbia. But it's the sensation that it's "designed" that sinks it. Everything feels contrived, from the name of the street the Wheelers live on (also the name of the movie) to even just the fact that the Wheeler children disappear at the most opportune times for the plot.

Perhaps it's because AMC's "Mad Men" tackles many of the same themes with a much more believable dimensionality, but nothing about "Revolutionary Road" feels real, making the misanthropy even harder to swallow. It's a sterile, contrived film about unlikable people that's only worth seeing for a few very good performances. Sam Mendes puts the Wheelers in a bubble and asks us to care about them in his typically cold, clinical manner but the story he's telling required a little heat and a little air to really work.

'Revolutionary Road' stars Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Winslet, Kathy Bates, and Michael Shannon. 'Revolutionary Road,' which was written by Justin Haythe and directed by Sam Mendes, opened in Chicago on January 2, 2009.



[14]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/justin-haythe>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/kate-winslet>
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- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/revolutionary-road>
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